Soviet Saucers

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By James Oberg

Day after day, the waves of UFOs returned to southern Russia. Cossacks on horseback saw them high in the evening sky. Pilots aboard commercial airliners and military interceptors chased and dodged them. Astronomers at observatories in the Caucasus Mountains noted their crescent shape and their fiery companions.

It was the fall of 1967, and the Soviet Union was in the grip of its first major UFO flap. The extraordinary tales, described on Soviet television, reported in Soviet newspapers, and analyzed in a private nationwide UFO study group soon took on a life of their own.

In one detailed account, an airliner crew from Voroshilovgrad to Volgograd, flight 104, insisted that a UFO had hovered and then maneuvered around their plane. According to Soviet UFO enthusiast Felix Zigel, who compiled such accounts, the plane's engines died and did not start up again until after the UFO had disappeared, when the aircraft was only a half mile high in the air.

These tales and others were repeated in Western UFO books and presented as

important evidence at UFO hearings in the United States Congress and in Britain's House of Lords. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the wave of Russian UFO sightings ceased. Private UFO groups were banned by the Soviet government, and the subject was dropped from the controlled media even as it spread wildly in the samizdat, the underground Russian press.

But the phenomenon was not forgotten. Years later, astronomer Lev Gindilis and a team of investigators from the Academy of Sciences in Moscow assessed Zigel's UFO files, analyzing statistics from what they said was "the repetitive motion" of the objects Zigel described. In 1979, the "Gindilis Report" was released and distributed around the world. It concluded that no known natural or manmade stimulus could account for these "anomalous atmospheric phenomena." Something truly extraordinary and truly alien must have occurred.

But it was too good to be true. Like many other official Soviet government reports, the Gindilis Report turned out to be counterfeit science. In effect, and probably in intent, it served to cover up one of Moscow's greatest military secrets, an illegal space-to-earth nuclear weapon.

What the witnesses really saw back in those exciting days in 1967 were space vehicles all right, but not from some distant, alien world. They were Russian missile warheads, placed in low orbit under false registration names and then diverted back toward the planet's surface after one circuit of the globe. As they fireballed down toward a target zone near the lower Volga River, they seared their way into the imaginations of startled witnesses for hundreds of miles in all directions.

Of course, U.S. intelligence agencies had also been watching the tests, and they weren't fooled by the UFO smokescreen. Pentagon experts soon dubbed this fearsome new weapon a "fractional orbit bombardment system," or FOBS. Government spokespeople in Washington denounced it as a first-strike weapon designed to evade defensive radars. Since Moscow had recently signed a solemn international treaty forbidding the orbiting of nuclear weapons, the existence of this weapon (whose tests alone did not violate the treaty) was a glaring advertisement of contempt. So when Russian UFO witnesses concluded that they had been seeing alien spaceships instead of treaty-busting weapons tests, Soviet military officials were all too willing to permit this illusion to prosper.

Twenty-five years later, with the FOBS rockets long since scrapped and the Soviet regime itself on the scrap heap of history, the now-purposeless deception has maintained a zombielike life of its own. Russian UFO literature continues to issue ever more glorious accounts of the 1967 "crescent spaceships." Mainstream Russian magazines, newspapers, and even museum exhibits contain fanciful drawings of such shapes. Zigel himself is revered as "the father of Soviet UFOlogy," an icon of reliability and authenticity.

But Zigel's and Gindilis's crescent craft are just one example of the ridiculous notions and outrageous fictions Russian UFOlogy has spawned. In 1977, for instance, Tass, the official Russian news agency, carried a dispatch from the northwest Russian port city of Petrozavodsk titled "Strange Natural Phenomenon over Karelia." Wrote local correspondent Nikolay Milov, "On September 20 at about 0400 a huge star suddenly flared up in the dark

sky, impulsively sending shafts of light to the earth. This star moved slowly toward Petrozavodsk and, spreading out over it in the form of a jellyfish, hung there, showering the city with a multitude of very fine rays which created an image of pouring rain."

The "visitation" unleashed a torrent of rumors. People later reported being awakened from deep sleep by telepathic messages. Tiny holes were reportedly seen in windows and paving stones. Cars were said to have stalled and computers to have crashed, and witnesses smelled ozone.

Soviet UFO enthusiasts rushed to embrace the case. "As far as I am concerned," claimed science-fiction author Aleksandr Kazantsev, "it was a spaceship from outer space, carrying out reconnaissance." According to Dr. Vladimir Azhazha, "In my opinion, what was seen over Petrozavodsk was either a UFO, a carrier of high intelligence with crew and passengers, or it was a field of energy created by such a UFO." Zigel, the dean of Soviet UFOlogists, agreed it was a true UFO: "Without a doubt--it had all the features."

Sadly, the cause of all this mindless panic was a routine rocket launching from the supersecret military space center at Plesetsk in northwest Russia. The multiengined booster's contrails, backlit by the dawn sun, seemed to split into multiple glowing tentacles.

In 1981, a midnight rocket launch from Plesetsk lit up the skies of Moscow itself and sent the capital city's residents into a blitz of unconstrained creativity. UFO expert Sergey Bozhich's notebooks contain reports of numerous "independent" UFO encounters during this ordinary launching. "Pilots of six

civil aircraft reported either a UFO in flight or a UFO [attacking] their aircraft," he wrote. "At 1:30 a UFO attacked a truck along the Ryazan Avenue in Moscow." One witness even reported waking from a deep sleep to see a "scout ship" with a glass cupola and small alien pilot cruising down his street.

The pattern is clear. Time and again, secret launchings of Russian rockets have unleashed avalanches of classic UFO perceptions from the imaginative, excitable witnesses and their careless interviewers. And consistent with its origins, Russian UFO literature is still characterized by fantastic tales and an utter lack of research into possible explanations. "I have no doubts" is the most common figure of speech in the lexicon of Russian UFOlogists, and they are doubtlessly sincere, if arguably deluded. "Are UFOs real?" one was asked not long ago by American documentary filmmaker Bryan Gresh. "My colleagues and I don't even think that's a question," he responded. "Of course they are real!"

This sort of quasi-religious fervor just helps to fuel the skepticism of the cautious observer. After all, if Russian UFOlogists cannot or will not recognize the prosaic stimulus behind these phony crescent UFOs of 1967 and the UFO "jellyfish" of 1977, they may be incapable of solving any of the other hundreds of ordinary (if rare) causes that account for at least 90 percent (if not 100 percent) of all UFO perceptions. Dozens of major stimuli, and hundreds of minor ones, are constantly giving rise to counterfeit UFO perceptions around the world. Filtering out the residue of true UFOs from the pseudo UFOs poses enormous challenges for investigators. Most Russian UFOlogists appear unwilling to face this challenge.

And the writings of prominent Russian UFO experts give ample ground for more anxiety. Vladimir Azhazha, probably the leading Russian UFO expert of the 1990s, is an undeniable enthusiast of UFO miracle stories. Some years ago, his favorite Western UFO story involved a UFO attack on the Apollo 13 space capsule, which he "disclosed" was carrying a secret atomic bomb to create seismic waves on the moon.

But it was carrying no such thing. The April 1970 explosion, which disabled the craft and threatened the lives of the three astronauts, was caused by a hardware malfunction. When challenged recently by UFOlogist Antonio Huneeus, Azhazha made a candid admission: "When I gave the lecture, I was a teenager in UFOlogy and was intoxicated by the E.T. hypothesis and did not recognize anything else. I would retell with pleasure everything I read."

Supposedly reformed, Azhazha then published a new book with a glorious new Apollo-astronaut UFO story based this time on forged photographs published in American tabloid newspapers. The pictures show contrast-enhanced fuzzballs, photographic images that had been sharpened in the photo lab. A fabricated "radio conversation" in which the astronauts exclaim surprise at seeing alien spaceships in a crater near their landing site later appeared in another tabloid; it was patently bogus, too, based on grossly misused space jargon. The story was long ago abandoned by reputable Western UFOlogists, but Azhazha still loves it and presents it as true.

At a UFO conference in Albuquerque in 1992, Azhazha told astonished Western colleagues that he had proof that 5,000 Russians had been abducted by UFOs

and never returned to Earth. When asked to defend this number, he disclosed that he took the reported number of ordinary "missing persons" in the entire Soviet Union, plotted the regions over which major UFO activity had been reported, and then allocated those population proportions of "missing" to the UFOs. It was simple, sincere, and senseless, but the embarrassed American hosts (who had paid his travel expenses) couldn't disagree too publicly lest their waste of money be obvious.

Russian UFOlogists claim to be careful. Azhazha himself has written: "Nothing on faith! One must check, check, and eleven times check in order to find an error!" But he doesn't seem to know how, and neither do any of his colleagues. While their sincerity and enthusiasm are not in doubt, their judgment, balance, and accuracy should be.

Why are people like Azhazha the best that Russia can offer? Russians are heirs to a great, creative civilization, but they are also emerging from a social era that has had profound effects on their habits of thought. Today's Russians have lived in a reality-deprived and judgment-atrophied culture for generations. Once they were sufficiently brain benumbed by a repressive communist regime to accept any and all propagandistic idiocies fed to them, they were intellectually defenseless against infections of other brain bunk as well.

UFO enthusiasm prospers in this nurturing environment. And it's not just UFO sightings that get conjured up by this fuzzy thinking. Historical figures, preferably dead ones who cannot disagree, are now constantly being portrayed as "secret UFO believers."

For example, in 1993, a slick new UFO magazine called AURA-Z appeared in Moscow. Continuing the trend of tying now-dead space heroes to UFO studies, the magazine featured two separate interviews with contemporary experts concerning the role played by Sergey Korolev, the founder of the Soviet missile and space programs. It didn't bother the magazine at all that the two stories were utterly inconsistent.

In one article, rocket expert Valery Burdakov presented a detailed account of how back in 1947 Stalin had ordered Korolev to assess Soviet intelligence reports on the Roswell, New Mexico, UFO crash. Korolev had reported back that the UFOs were real but not dangerous, the article "revealed." Yet just seven pages earlier, another expert named Lev Chulkov had written: "As early as the beginning of the 1950s, Stalin ordered Korolev to study the phenomenon of UFOs, but Korolev managed to avoid fulfilling this task." Of course, both claims can't be true. Besides, Burdakov was a recently rehabilitated political prisoner in 1947 and was thus hardly the type of trusted expert that Stalin would have consulted.

Behind all such distracting noise, the UFO problem remains a fascinating and elusive puzzle, worthy of serious research. But weeding out true UFOs from the overwhelming mass of "IFOs," or identified flying objects, is a difficult, time-consuming task, as Western UFOlogists have learned in the past half century. Their new Russian colleagues so far show no indication that they have even begun.

"I haven't seen too much effort at that job," admits Antonio Huneeus, one of

the West's most perceptive pro-UFO observers of Russian UFOlogy. "The Russians themselves keep knocking on my door," Huneeus states. "They want to sell their stuff here." In fact, given today's economic crisis in Russia, thousands of people of all classes, but particularly from the military services, are desperately seeking--or deliberately creating--anything they can sell to Western buyers with bucks. UFO files are one of the few exportable raw materials with a market in the West, so there should be no surprise that there are suddenly so many bizarre items now available and so few Russians willing to be cautious or critical about them.

If these Russian UFO delusions only affected their own research, the silliness would do no worldwide harm. But the intellectual infection has spread far beyond borders and polluted UFO studies in other countries as well. These new commercial conspiracies between Russian tall-tale sellers and Western tall-tale tellers in the entertainment and pseudodocumentary industry will make it much worse.

The more serious Western UFOlogists, for instance, are particularly embarrassed by their colleagues' naive, unbounded enthusiasm for the 1967 "crescents" and the subsequent so-called Gindilis Report, with Soviet thermonuclear weapons tests masquerading as true UFOs. Dr. James McDonald, probably America's top UFO expert of the 1960s, testified that the crescents "cannot be readily explained in any conventional terms." Dr. J. Allen Hynek, dean of American UFOlogy in the 1970s, reviewed the sightings and crowed, "It becomes very much harder--in fact, from my personal viewpoint, impossible--to find a trivial solution for all the UFO reports if one weighs and considers the caliber of some of the witnesses." They were scientists, pilots,

engineers, and fellow astronomers, and Hynek was absolutely certain they couldn't have been mistaken.

Today's successor to McDonald and Hynek is retired space scientist Richard Haines, American director of the joint United States-Commonwealth of Independent States working group on UFOs, the Aerial Anomaly Federation. Concerning the 1967 sightings, he confidently wrote that "the reports represent currently unknown phenomena, being completely different in nature from known atmospheric optics effects or technical experiments in the atmosphere."

Another famous Russian pseudo-UFO case, called the "Cape Kamenny UFO," has long been foolishly championed by Western UFO experts. Top American UFOlogist Jacques Vallee cited this encounter in a 1992 book as one of the best in the world. His casebook coding scheme gave it the highest marks: "Firsthand personal interview with the witness by a source of proven reliability; site visited by a skilled analyst; and no explanation possible, given the evidence."

A graphic account of this UFO was given by American UFOlogist William L. Moore based on casebooks compiled by Zigel. "On December 3, [1967] at 3:04 p.m.," wrote Moore, several crewmen and passengers of an IL-18 aircraft on a test flight for the State Scientific Institute of Civil Aviation sighted an intensely bright object approaching them in the night sky." Moore reported that the object "followed" the evasive turns of the aircraft.

But years later I discovered that the aircraft, passing near Vorkuta in the

northern Urals, had by chance been crossing the flight path of the Kosmos-194 spy satellite during its ascent from Plesetsk. The crew had unwittingly observed the rocket's plumes and the separation of its strap-on boosters. All other details of maneuvers were added in by their imaginations. Yet this bogus UFO story is highlighted as authentic by nearly every Western account of Russian UFOs in the last 20 years.

Of course, not all Russian UFO reports spring from missile and space events. Far from it! But those specific kinds of stimuli are extremely well documented, unlike other traditional pseudo-UFO stimuli such as balloons, experimental aircraft, military and police helicopters, bolide fireballs, and so forth. Thus, they can provide an unmatchable calibration test for the ability of Russian UFOlogists to find solutions for these pseudo UFOs.

The Russian UFOlogists have failed. The ultimate test of the Russians' ability to perform mature, reliable UFO research is how they treat "the smoking gun" of Russian UFOlogy, the Petrozavodsk "jellyfish" UFO of 1977. The "jellyfish" was a brief wonder in the West before being quickly solved (by me) as the launch of a rocket from Plesetsk. Western UFOlogists readily accepted the explanation, but now it turns out that Russian UFO experts never did. They have assembled a vast array of miracle stories associated with the event, including reports of telepathic messages and physical damage to the earth.

But all this proves is that ordinary Russians love to embellish stories and that Russian UFO researchers haven't a clue on how to filter out such exaggerations from original perceptions. If they cannot do it for such

obviously bogus UFOs as Petrozavodsk, how can they be expected to do it for less clear-cut ones?

If the UFO mystery is to be solved, there is adequate data from the rest of the world outside of Russia. Serious UFOlogists will have to quarantine the obviously hopelessly infected UFO lore from Russia and disregard it all. Some valuable data might be lost, but the crippling effect of unconstrained crackpottery would be avoided. Every decade or two, the question can be reconsidered with a simple test: Do leading Russian UFOlogists still insist on the alien nature of the 1967 crescent UFOs and the 1977 "jellyfish" UFO? If so, slam the door on them again.

Yet the temptation may be too great, especially for those who are into what I call the "fairy tale mode" of modern UFO study--those who believe the best cases are ones that happened long ago and far away, and thus are forever immune from prosaic solution. Russian UFO stories have turned out to be exactly those kinds of fairy tales.

And if the purpose of modern UFOlogy is only mystery worship and obfuscation, only mind-boggling tall tales and mind-stretching theorizing, then it will continue to feed on the baseless bilge coming out of Russia while being insidiously and unavoidably poisoned by it. The reality test, then, is not of Russian UFOlogy, which has already failed, but of non-Russian UFOlogy, where the issue remains in doubt.

Editor's note: James Oberg, author of RED STAR IN ORBIT and many other books, is an internationally recognized expert on the Soviet space program.

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